DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 108 CG 020 151

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TITLE Sex-Role Conflict in Female Athletes: A Possible Marker for Alcoholism.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 29p.; Paper presented at the Annual National Symposium on Building Family Strengths (10th, Lincoln, NE, May 13-15, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Alcoholism; *Athletes; College Students; Comparative Analysis; *Females; Higher Education; High Risk Persons; *Personality Traits; *Role Conflict; *Sex Role
IDENTIFIERS *Alcohol Abuse

ABSTRACT

The impact of sex-role conflict among females has been an issue of concern in both the sports arena and the field of alcoholism. This study explored the similarities in sex-role conflict between female athletes and alcoholic women. Subjects were 30 female inpatients of a chemical dependency treatment center; 30 undergraduate students; and 30 intercollegiate female athletes from university baseball, track, and basketball teams. Subjects completed the Personal Attributes Questionnaire on two consecutive administrations, once describing their "real" behavior and once describing their "ideal" deportment. The results indicated that female athletes and female alcoholics were similar to each other and different from controls along the dimensions of sex-role conflict. A literature review revealed parallels between female athletes and female alcoholics in the areas of feminine socialization, power needs, competition, and sensation-seeking which also differentiated them from women in general. These findings suggest that female athletes may be more susceptible to alcoholism and chemical dependency than is the average individual. Personnel dedicated to the development of female athletes should be apprised of the many parallels between female athletes and female alcoholics and the danger this resemblance represents. Early and ongoing intervention is recommended. (Author/NB)

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Sex-role conflict in female athletes: A possible marker for alcoholism

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Presented:

National Alcoholism Forum

Cleveland Ohio

April 1987.

Running Head: FEMALE ATHLETES

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Sex-role conflict in female athletes:

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Submitted April 24, 1987.

Abstract

This study explores the similarities in sex-role conflict between female athletes and alcoholic women. Subjects completed the Personal Attributes Questionnaire on two consecutive administrations, once describing their "real" behavior, and once detailing "ideal" deportment. Results indicate that female athletes and female alcoholics were similar to each other and different from controls along the dimensions of sex-role conflict. A literature review revealed parallels between the two populations of interest in the areas of feminine socialization, power needs, competition, and sensation-seeking which also differentiated them from women-in-general. Implications for susceptibility to alcoholism as a consequence of these findings are discussed. Issues in preventive counseling are explored.

Sex-role conflict in female athletes:

A possible marker for alcoholism.

The impact of sex-role conflict among females has been an issue of concern in the sports arena and in the field of alcoholism. Sport competition is considered a masculine role in society (Wark & Wittig, 1979) and the higher the feminine sex-role orientation the greater the levels of competitive trait anxiety (Wittig, 1984). Boutilier and SanGiovanni (1983) emphasize that the characteristics evoked in competitive sports are diametrically opposed to those for which American women are reinforced. Similarly, drinking has been historically viewed as a male domain. The use of alcohol and other mood altering chemicals (MACs) among wives and mothers has been severely sanctioned.

Sex-roles comprise societal prescriptions and proscriptions concerning the attitudes and behaviors to which individuals are encouraged to adhere. Due in part to these pressures, women-in-general evolve as affectionate, sensitive, and

sentimental; gentle, submissive, weak, and emotional (Matlin, 1987). Moreover, they are socialized toward affiliation, nurturance, obedience, and dependence (Block, 1973). In contrast, an athlete is required to be competent, assertive, tenacious, striving, goal-oriented, and self-confident.

This treatise focuses on the applied and theoretical relevance of sex-role conflict in the etiology of alcoholism. Incongruence in sex-role orientation has been identified as an ubiquitous component in the development of alcoholism in women (Wilsnack, 1976). Moreover, sex-role conflict is not the only commonality which female athletes share with addicted women. The "multiple risk hypothesis" (Bry, 1983) explains that there are identifiable variables associated with alcoholism and that it is their quantity rather than their configuration which is critical to the onset and progression of the disease. Initially this article highlights the similarities between female athletes and alcoholic women. We will explore the

socialization influences which impinge on women. Next, we will attempt to link female athletes and alcoholic women along the dimensions of competitiveness, power strivings, and the need for stimulation. We then turn to a description of the literature on sex-role conflict in alcoholic women. Finally this paper describes an experiment designed to empirically investigate sex-role conflict in female athletes. Though theoretically appealing, the reality of the sex-role conflict among female athletes has to date received little empirical validation. We will compare these results of the athletes to those of alcoholic women and nonaddicted controls, and discusses implications which devolve from the data.

Socialization Processes

The inculcation of values, behaviors, and attitudes deemed gender-appropriate persists from cradle to grave. Little girls learn in preschool years to be oriented toward dependence and communion. For example, parents reinforce independent exploration in boys but express concern

for autonomous behavior in their female children (Huston, 1983). Additionally, parents give their children sex-typed toys to facilitate sex-appropriate interests (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974).

Gender related behavior is further refined in the classrooms of the nation. As children leave the family environment they enter the domain of teacher and peer influence.

In school teachers give boys more attention, praise, and instruction while girls are taught to be docile and conforming (Levy, 1973). Evidence emerging from the data indicate that 80% of first-graders rate females as less competent on tasks than males (Pollis & Doyle, 1972). By the age of ten both sexes attribute female's success on "male-appropriate" assignments to external factors such as luck or accident rather than such internal characteristics as ability (Etaugh & Brown, 1975).

The cultural stereotype of the dependent female is further instilled through literature. Researchers investigated sex-related dependency themes in 130 books for children and adolescents (White, 1986).

Findings demonstrate that when help was given and received in these fictional narratives, females were more likely to receive than to give help and males were more likely to give than to receive help. The school atmosphere also directs a young woman's participation on the playing fields and in other fields of endeavor.

In sum, therefore, society instructs young women not to undertake too much, place themselves in danger, or squander time and effort on "male" matters. This misplaced protectiveness interferes with the process of acquisition of personal efficacy with respect to achievement. Moreover, behavior of females in a variety of settings suggests that even when women experience accomplishment, knowledge of past successes does not readily transfer to novel challenges (Loy, McPherson, & Kenyon, 1978) .

Competitiveness

As noted previously, society typically elicits and reinforces independence and competitiveness in males and subdues it in females (Huston, 1983).

Moreover, researchers have noted a "fear of success" in women (Horner, 1972). For Horner, women fear that success in competitive situations will lead to unpleasant consequences. Females who want to succeed and win may feel they run the risk of ostracism if they express personality characteristics which are not viewed as gender appropriate. Moreover, success may interfere with the traditional fulfillment of other basic needs such as sex and affiliation. For example, it is customary in our society for men to marry down and women to marry up. A male executive can pair with a high school dropout whereas a woman is pressured to mate with someone of higher status than she. The more successful a woman becomes, therefore, the more circumscribed becomes her partner choice.

There has been some research evaluating the competitive natures of female athletes and alcoholics. On masculinity and femininity norms published by Spence and Helmreich (1978) female athletes were identified as significantly more elevated on the competitiveness scale of the Work-

and-Family-Orientation inventory. Using the same measure, Wetzig (1987) demonstrated that alcoholic women obtained more elevated scores than their nonaddicted sisters. Furthermore their competitiveness scores were comparable to those of female athletes and equalled those of men. It would seem, therefore, that female athletes and female alcoholics share a common competitive trait which distinguishes them from women-in-general who are more oriented toward communality.

Power Needs

In a seminal volume, David McClelland (1975) delineated the four developmental stages eventuating in a need for power. In Stage 1, the "Dependence" stage, one draws power needs from external sources. In the "Autonomy" stage, Stage 2, an individual looks to the self as the instrument. In the "Competitiveness" or third stage one acquires power through direct impact on the environment including other people; and in Stage 4, "Altruism", a person dedicates herself as an instrument to a high power.

McClelland has investigated power motives for both athletes and alcoholics. He posits that sport involvement is the penultimate arena for the articulation of power needs. Additionally, he differentiates the sport appropriate for each stage. A Stage 2 sport such as track, for instance, is indirectly competitive. The performance of one contender does not overtly impinge on that of another, rather its effects are predominantly internal -- an achievement orientation. Conversely, in a Stage 3 sport one opponent directly impacts another through strike-outs in baseball or by blocking shots in basketball. In this third stage, therefore, power needs are assuaged through influencing the emotions and behavior of other individuals -- a competitive orientation. McLelland further posits that females do not typically progress beyond the first two or three stages.

In his work with alcoholics, McClelland postulates that individuals drink to enhance feelings of power (McClelland, Davis, Kalin &

Wanner, 1972). Initially, mood altering chemicals (MACs) offer the opportunity to be whatever you want to be and to attain whichever goals you desire. McClelland's (1972) study demonstrated that alcohol increased impressions of having an impact on others and of conquest. MACs alleviate feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, and powerlessness. Hence, if a person feels unable to cope with obstacles and challenges, a drink or a pill may facilitate the illusion of situational mastery. At the first or "dependency" stage elucidated by McClelland (1975) MACs function as the outside source of power. MACs are cunning. They entice victims with the promise of omnipotence, then entrap them with psychological and physical dependency. In the final stage, a recovering alcoholic approaches "Altruism" by being the instrument of a higher power as suggested in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Sensation Seeking

The evidence indicates that both these populations demonstrate a magnified requirement for

stimulation. This trait speaks to the individual's tendency to seek complex and enriched environments which offer heightened levels of physically and emotionally arousing stimuli. The sports arena offers a variety of opportunities for suspense, novelty, and complexity. So too does the lifestyle of the alcoholic replete with crises and chaos. Researchers document sensation seeking as a motivational determinant for sport involvement (Donnelly, 1976) and alcohol use (Schwarz, Burkhart, & Green, 1978).

Sex-role Conflict

The literature on women and alcoholism features a panoply of empirical investigations of sex-role conflict. Wilsnack (1979) concluded that a conflict between conscious femininity and unconscious masculine striving contributed to female alcohol problems. Conversely, other researchers report that alcoholic women exhibit conscious masculinity and unconscious feminine needs (Beckman, 1978). These anomalies have variously been labelled role rejection, role

confusion, masculine identification and deviant self-image. In 1979 Scida and Vannicelli offered a rapprochement suggesting that the size of the sex-role conflict rather than the direction comprised the pivotal determinant of alcoholism. The greater the difference between an individual's "real" and "ideal" sexual self-image, the greater her tendency toward problem drinking.

Although allusions to a predisposition for incongruent conscious and unconscious sex-role orientation have been made in the body of work on female athletes (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983), there has been to date little rigorous research in this area. The present study examines the discrepancy between "real" and "ideal" sex-role styles of college female athletes to determine whether this is indeed an additional area in which the characteristics of women athletes parallel those of women alcoholics. Three distinct sports' domains were earmarked for investigation on the basis of 5 surveys on female athletes conducted over the past decade which indicated favorable

societal attitudes toward females taking part in tennis, swimming, and gymnastics, whereas there were reservations for basketball, softball, and track participation. If the primary hypothesis of this paper is supported, the multiple risk theory (Bry, 1973) would suggest that sex-role conflict is an additional factor pinpointing female athletes as susceptible to addiction.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 30 female inpatients of Rosary Hall, St. Vincent's Charity Hospital, a chemical dependency treatment center, 30 undergraduate students, and 30 intercollegiate female athletes from the baseball, track, and basketball teams at the University of Akron. Women in the sample (n = 90) had an average age of 20.3 years (SD = 1.2) with the range of ages from 18 to 25 years.

Instruments

Personal Attributes Questionnaire. The short form of the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Spence & Helmreich, 1978) measured sex-role

orientation. Items present contradictory characteristics and the respondent is required to select a letter between A and E which describes where she falls on the scale between the two extremes. A typical item offers a choice between the opposites of "very independent" or "not at all independent" and "not at all emotional" or "very emotional". The PAQ includes 3 scale: (1) the Masculinity scale comprising items appropriate to both sexes but which are perceived as possessed by males to a greater degree; (2) a similar scale for Femininity; and (3) a bipolar Masculinity-Femininity scale depicting traits viewed as appropriate to either male or female but not to both. The reliability of the short form scale have been demonstrated with Cronbach alphas of .78 to .85.

A questionnaire requesting subjects to supply biographical and demographical data such as age, race, and income was also administered.

Procedure and Statistics

Subjects were invited to participate in the study on a voluntary basis over several months. The respondents completed the PAQ test twice. The first time they answered questions in a manner which reflected the way they actually were in real life. The second administration depicted how they would ideally like to be. Questionnaires were completed in 30 minute group sessions.

A chi-square analysis was used to evaluate whether the three groups were comparable in terms of racial composition. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) compared the three groups on: (1) bio-demographical information (age and income); and (2) differences between "real" and "ideal" PAQ scores. Post hoc Student-Newman-Keuls (SNK) procedures were executed to determine the location of significant disparities in score.

Results

The chi-square analysis of racial composition revealed no significant differences among the groups. A one-way ANOVA to determine whether there

were significant differences between the three groups on the other bio-demographical variables were not significant: age (F = .28, df = 2,87, p>.05); and income (F = 1.7[illegible], df = 2,87, p>,05). These findings suggested that the groups were sufficiently comparable to allow for further exploration.

A second one-way ANOVA examined the relationship between scores on the "real" and "ideal" administration of the PAQ for each of the groups. The "sex-role conflict score" was determined by adding the difference between scores for masculinity plus the difference between scores for femininity on the first versus the second administration. For both female athletes and female alcoholics this difference was significant, F (1,28) = 9.83, p<.01, and F(1,28) = 10.08, p<.01, respectively. No significant sex-role conflict was found for the control group (N = 30).

The final one-way ANOVA examined differences between the three groups and determined significance, F (2,87) = 12.76, p<.01. Post hoc

SNK analysis identified significant differences between the athletes/alcoholics and controls, but no differences between the athlete and alcoholic group. The controls demonstrated significantly less sex-role conflict than did either of the other two groups.

Discussion

As predicted, female athletes were similar to female alcoholics and unlike controls as evidenced by the significant disparity between their "real" and "ideal" sex-role orientation. The sex-role conflict took a number of forms. Female athletes variously expressed perceived masculinity and valued femininity; perceived femininity and valued masculinity, or the desire for androgyny, an elevation of both masculine and feminine characteristics.

The predispositions demonstrated by the athletes in this study are reminiscent of the literature pertaining to the etiology of alcoholism in women. The magnitude of the conflict seems to be the pivotal factor in alcohol misuse (Scida &

Vannicelli, 1979). Some addictive women appear to overly value the traditional female role of wife and mother (Wilsnack, 1978). They prefer to display the "feminine", submissive posture of nurturer, caretaker, keeper of the hearth, and live vicariously through family members. Paradoxically, these women exhibit underlying drives for achievement, dominance, competition, and other "masculine" instrumental needs. Certain situational factors including the fervor of the basketball court or the responsibilities incurred as financial head of a household will evoke these underlying presses. An individual can become surprisingly aggressive and competitive. In these circumstances, as values and behavior become increasingly disparate, intrapsychic conflict is exacerbated, concomitant anxiety peaks, and certain individuals are compelled to dispel the pain with alcohol. The results of this study suggest that a percentage of female athletes fall in this category.

Alternately, some addictive women favor an overtly masculine manner. On the surface they exhibit agentic traits of assertion, independence, and achievement. Under this veneer, however, lie feminine needs for dependency and affiliation (Beckman, 1978). More of the athletic subjects appear to fall in this category. The fatal flaw in the career of this style of athlete is that the more successful she becomes in her chosen field of endeavor, the more the opportunities available to her to meet unconscious drives become constricted. Significant others tend to seek help from rather than provide succor to those whom they perceive as strong and dominant. Frequently, these women may find support systems eroding. As in the case of the feminine-style of female athlete, the more discrepant become her needs and reinforcers, the more vulnerable she becomes to the allure of mood altering chemicals to alleviate the distress of unmet needs. These women are squarely on the horns of a dilemma, and an easy, available, and obvious means of escape is open to them.

These results in and of themselves are of interest. Coupled with the added resemblance previously noted between female athletes and alcoholics, however, interest becomes concern. The literature is replete with references to the socialization incurred by females in our culture, as well as the power needs, sensation-seeking, and competitiveness of the athlete and the alcoholic. These data highlight the parallels between athlete and alcoholic and differentiate them from nonaddictive women. Additionally, a family history of chemical dependency would denote an even greater danger of alcoholism in the athlete. Based on the multiple risk hypothesis (Bry, 1983) we can infer that female athletes are more susceptible to alcoholism and chemical dependency than the average individual. Moreover, the rigors and requirements of competition present an additional risk factor. Mood altering chemicals initially symbolize the magical key enabling an athlete to be physically and emotionally primed at a moment's notice--

winning in a bottle. In many instances, this may prove too tempting to refuse.

Early and ongoing intervention is therefore indicated. A systematized informational approach would benefit all competitors. Consciousness raising (CR) groups would introduce young women to the spectrum of societal presses which shape them. Typically attitudes, values, and beliefs have been so subtly inculcated that individuals remain unaware of the vested interests instrumental in their origin. Feminist writings explicate much of the history of the forces involved in the subjugation of women. A group format is recommended as it affords participants an appreciation of a commonality of experience while providing the support necessary as belief systems are torn down and new healthy ones established. As the sex-role incongruence is brought to conscious awareness implications consequent to intrapsychic conflict and the role of society in the etiology of the distress is addressed within the group.

A selection of values clarification exercises serves to ground the new belief system. Moreover, this exploration would reveal the societal consequences of power, competition, and stimulation needs in females. An overview of assertion training with an emphasis on the distinction between passivity, assertiveness, and aggressiveness enables these women to have needs met without the appearance of the aggression which draws the sanction of our society. To facilitate this program, relaxation training enables participants to comfortably confront value systems. Moreover, this proficiency in the natural approach to anxiety reduction offers an alternative to the use of MACs.

In sum, therefore, personnel dedicated to the development of female athletes should be apprised of the many parallels between female athletes and female alcoholics and the danger this resemblance represents. Alcoholism is a chronic, progressive disease and without intervention the prognosis is poor.

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